

December 20, 2008 New York Times Editorial [Wayward Eye on the Homeland](#)

Of all the pressing tasks to bolster homeland security, the one that Congress has most dedicatedly ignored is the call to reform itself.

A hydra-headed system of oversight currently finds the Department of Homeland Security answerable to 16 committees and 40 subcommittees in the House, and 14 committees and 18 subcommittees in the Senate. This is a comedy that invites fresh national tragedy unless Congressional leaders finally resolve to streamline down to a few dedicated panels. They must have the power to budget and bird-dog the sprawling agency, just as comparable scrutiny must be introduced to the parallel world of national and military intelligence gathering.

These crucial reforms have been undermined by the culture of fiefdoms where gavels are clung to by a herd of Congressional bulls snorting on their separate turfs as the real-life threats from terrorism grow more complex.

When the 9/11 commission first warned of the oversight chaos in 2004, lawmakers dared to insist there was “purposeful redundancy” in their ramshackle approach. The commission’s alarm has been repeated lately by two more bipartisan, independent expert groups commissioned by none other than Congress. Will the next Congress finally listen? One of the studies, from the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, points out that forming commissions to get patently obvious advice is a symptom of Congress’s reluctance to change a structure built for the cold war, not modern terrorism.

A reorganization would require lawmakers to sacrifice committee powers they competed for years to accrue. But the only course, if Congress is serious about guarding the nation, is to center homeland oversight and budgeting in single committees in the Senate and House.

Reform will require more than just consolidating the oversight of national and military intelligence. Lawmakers must confront the monopoly of the hallowed appropriations panels by creating focused intelligence subcommittees with budget power. That is where true oversight begins.

